It's a timeless precursor to everything from the wicked grin of FINAL DESTINATION's elaborate doom to the morbidly humorous goth teen angst now sold fervently in suburban malls. While certainly not the first to reveal a sense of gallows humor about imminent death, Edward Gorey's GASHLYCRUMB TINIES hath endured, influencing the likes of Tim Burton and Clive Barker and reassuring that even as we suffer the little children to come unto the Grim Reaper, it's quite alright to crack a smile.

Small in stature itself, Edward Gorey's abecedarian book reimagines one of our earliest means of education in fine black and white illustration, rhyming the deaths of twenty six children by varying means—many, simple mistakes. "A is for Amy," it begins, "who fell down the stairs." As if the entirely probable, everyday fear of a little one—perhaps our own—taking a tumble is a tad too pervasive, Gorey immediately follows with something a bit more grandiose. "B is for Basil assaulted by bears." Axes, leeches, modern living and home décor all clasp their hands around Kate, Fanny, Una and more. It's a big, scary world out there and the miniscule frames of Gorey's brood are no match.

Released in 1963 by an author who spent a great deal of his life in Massachusetts, it's not hard to imagine many readers mistaking Gorey for a Briton. From his artistic aesthetic, to Death's top hat and umbrella, to the children's names—Clara, Ida, Maud, Neville—their tea dresses and small suits, and their health-related passings (fits, wasting away) Gorey paints a positively Victorian picture in GASHLYCRUMB. Aside from being his natural inclination (other works like THE DOUBTFUL GUEST and THE OBJECT LESSON also carry the style) GASHLYCRUMB's recalling of an 1800s English mindset and setting is the perfect frame.

A so-called "cult of the child" had taken hold of artistic and intellectual circles in the back half of the nineteenth century, as the likes of painter John Evertt Millais and authors Charles Dickens and Lewis Carroll (whose own fascination with idyllic children, without proper context, came under much scrutiny) illustrated, wrote of and greatly enjoyed the company of the young they so perceived to have an ethereal quality. Close to godliness with innocence untainted, children were depicted in portraits and serene scenes, admired endlessly—that is, until they hit 10, or so. They were not alone, however. The aforementioned, much as artists do, expressed a larger phenomenon at work. Author Jackie Wullschlager writes in her exploration of the Victorian

obsession, INVENTING WONDERLAND, “men such as Carroll, Ruskin, Dickens and Kilvert took the Victorian romance with childhood to an extreme, but everywhere in nineteenth-century society and art a fascination with childhood is apparent.”

B is for BASIL assaulted by bears

While obsession is no longer quite the right word, there’s an undeniable pedestal children have found themselves on in the ensuing years. Filled with an innocent grace, tragedy befalling the young remains a crutch in drama and a touchy topic to broach in horror, going so far as to be completely turned on its head via killer kid films. THE GASHLYCRUMB TINIES manages to both adhere to a certain reverence of children, killing its characters off before they’ve had a chance to sully their purity, and retroactively give the Victorians a reason to clutch those pearls. The entirety of the time, it’s morbidly grinning from ear to ear, backed by a light, nursery rhyming air.

Is the tiny odyssey of lettered death educational, as well? It would seem so. Barring two out and out murders (Kate, struck with an axe; Hector, done in by a thug), nature and pure happenstance are the real culprits of the iconic work. Such is death, so it goes and so everyone who reads it knows. There’s a laugh to be had in the certainty of our end, and Edward Gorey has undoubtedly helped many find it.

So, before you settle in to the truly outrageous THE ABCs OF DEATH, might we suggest you prime your young ones and future horror hounds with THE GASHLYCRUMB TINIES?